Critical Reflection: Confronting raced trajectories of teaching, learning and assessment to deepen professional belonging

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ABSTRACT
This discussion is the product of learning conversations after completing a short-term project using critical reflection to strengthen Global Majority architectural students' perceptions of their professional identity. As educators - trained in education rather than architects trained to teach architecture - Carol and Tracy share their vision of a transformative pedagogical strategy and through a worked example, tease out how to create spaces for students to strengthen their emerging professional identity by combining storytelling and critical reflection.

KEYWORDS
raced trajectories, white privilege, identity formation, reparation work

Introduction

This open discussion is the product of learning conversation following a small-scale project completed at a post-1992 urban University. The writers are educationalists - not architects trained to teach architects - and explore how by encouraging critical reflection of the raced trajectories of lived experience - in the context of final year student studying on the BSc (Hons) Architecture (ARB/RIBA) - opportunities to learn are deepened. As writers, we posit that to provide spaces for transformation, we need to develop skills for students to self validate their presence in professional spaces. We argue for curricula spaces to develop reflective skills that promote growth from injuries caused by lived experiences and encounters with education. Whilst this one-off project is limited in scope by the focus on tutor experience, we intend to build a case for the University to invest in a robust pilot study to reveal the importance of curricula spaces that celebrate the Global Majority student perspective, strengthen belonging, deepen professional identity and forge professional partnerships.

We open by setting the scene in the Higher Education Sector. Next, we problematise why active and experiential learning approaches will - without meaning to - silently confine some Global Majority students to the periphery of the learning community. We then move the conversation towards a Freirean discussion of the pedagogic importance of troubling oppression in all its guises, before talking directly to the raced trajectories of belonging in the field of architecture. Through critically analysing the learning conversation between Carol and Tracy, we unmask some of the identity work they undertake during and after the reflective activity.

Why the focus on students' voices and lived experiences?

The 'awarding gap' is the term used by the National Union of Student to describe the difference between the proportion of white UK-domiciled students who are awarded a 'good' degree - first or upper second degree – and the proportion of UK-domiciled Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students also awarded degrees of the same class.[1] The awarding gap is traced against all protected characteristics. Still, it is often at its starkest when considering the difference between the likelihood of white (domiciled) students and students from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) (domiciled) backgrounds being awarded a 'good' degree. For over a decade, research has shown that this 'differential ... cannot be explained by a deficit model linked to BAME students themselves'.[2] The disparity is also reflected in qualitative NSS feedback, with HEFCE noting that Black-Caribbean, Black-African and mixed ethnic origin students hold the lowest levels of satisfaction with their university experience. This paper does not intend to reflect on the reasons behind the awarding gap.[3] Still, we think that by including these figures, we show why universities are increasingly open to talking directly about race.

The University where the project took place has a diverse student body with approximately 70% of the population coming from Black, Asian or a mixed ethnic background, with almost 75% of entrants coming from urban postcodes with high levels of deprivation. In addition, the post-1992 University attracts first generation students, which is often the first experience of a family member attending University. The attended school is also traditionally likely to have had a low number of students entering University. This is important because lived experiences and past educational encounters impact the freedoms of an individual to learn.

When a student turns to academia, they do so with unconsciously formed, but durable learning habits, expectations of the curriculum and assumptions about teaching, learning and transition into professional life. When painful experiences frame learning, habits can all too easily become internalised as a natural (in)ability to learn. Rarely do students and lecturers unmask the hidden curriculum or interrogate the structural imbalance of power that sustains the awarding gap.[4] This open discussion hopes to reveal how, by directly talking about race, we can encourage students to reveal the effects of negative stereotypes. The authors build a case in favour of curricula spaces that deepen shared lived experiences and develop learning communities that embrace, dignify and learn from differences.[5]

First, a note on identity and reparation work

Identity embodies a shifting amalgam of personal biography, culture, social influence and institutional values, which may change according to role and circumstance'.[6] The emotional, physical and curricula unfreedoms that can prevent students from flourishing are often the products of complex identity work. The authors believe that through empowering students with critical reflective skills, individuals can gain the confidence to favourably negotiate their positioning against an imagined and/or ideal self, peers, and the cultural norms of the professional field.[7] We understand the term identity work to be the (oft-internal) monologues that an individual is compelled to silently think through, as they are confronted by contradictory productions of their academic and/or professional (in this case, architectural) self.[8] Reparation work is then required as an individual begins to make sense of these new surroundings. The act of identity and/or reparation work may be momentary or substantial, and, according to Jarvis, frequently emotionally and cognitively exhausting.[9]

Our pedagogical assumptions

When exposed, the individual's identity and reparation work can produce powerful reflective spaces that embrace a diversity of perspectives. However, it can be difficult to persuade students and staff that the development of meta-cognition skills - learning how to learn, reflective practices and active

listening skills, to name a few - are worthy of curricula time.[10] Therefore, before moving this paper forward, we frame the pedagogic spaces of the University and then briefly highlight some of the effects that durable learning habits can hold over the freedom that a student may have, to create an environment whereby learning can even become probable.

Illeris shows how traditional teaching tends to promote assimilative learning habits.[11] Although a vast spectrum is embedded within this perspective, there tends to be an underpinning belief that a universal language of academia can transcend the cultural, historical, and political complexities of (hu)mankind. The teacher is expected to enable students to assimilate new knowledge by skilfully weaving information through existing schemas of knowledge, organised primarily for speedy information retrieval. The role is to organise knowledge for the student and minimise the potential to make mistakes. The student, in return, is expected to demonstrate mastery of simple operations, before progressing onto complex routes of inquiry, incorporating generalised and abstract principles using specialist symbols, language, and codes.[12]

In contrast, there is accommodative teaching.[13] Within this view, students tend to be led through planned activities to deconstruct their own existing schemas of knowledge, identify their own misconceptions and establish their own patterns for knowledge creation. General principles tend to be contextualised to be meaningful to the students, and language tends to be viewed as a malleable tool to facilitate, rather than organise thinking.[14] The teacher becomes less visible and facilitates the learners to make agentic decisions about how their academic world makes sense to them. Within this framing, it is assumed that learning changes in relation to the cultural contexts of the student population. These are, broadly speaking, the principles that underlie active and experiential teaching pedagogies.

Problematically, however, accommodative approaches assume that there are 'right' learning conditions whereby every individual will (learn) to value their own knowledge and thus develop their own agentic ability to co-construct and share their ideas. Teaching in this way assumes students value their own and peers' ideas in parallel with the knowledge shared by the lecturer. The authors argue that whilst accommodative teaching principles hold some promising conditions, to level out the awarding gap will require new and authorised educational spaces that enable students and staff to reflect on power relations critically and to make sense of who is privileged, ignored, renegaded to the periphery and to interrogate why.

In looking to understand why - without talking explicitly about race or taking account of identity and reparation work - teaching will inevitably sustain the material power imbalances that feed the awarding gap, and we briefly look to Lawler's understandings of 'the site of the self'.[15] Lawler posits that unproblematised notions of the self tend to be constructed through humanist traditions whereby the individual is understood to be unique, autonomous,

in charge of their actions and the author of their own circumstances. Within this trail of thought, the self tends to be understood to be unitary, and whilst relations of power are recognised as complex, relations are primarily framed as stable and something that can be captured for analysis. For example, an indicator of a humanist/accommodative learning task around reflection would be when an educator tasks the student with a search for their true or deep self.[16]

Myers works through how by compelling students to assimilate and identify norms, by looking for unity, the individuals who seek to challenge racialised ways of knowing become 'Othered'. He explains

> ...commitment to colour-blind-ness results in White teachers denying the very significance of race and placing this quote in the context of this paper; there is a reduction in the value of practice. The competencies and contributions made by Black students are underestimated and often overlooked.[17]

Introducing liberatory learning

Freire is one of the most quoted authors in the field of education, and given the openness of his framework, there is inevitably a wide spectrum for positioning the self as a Freirean.[18] However, perspectives are bound through the focus on the political nature of education, the inevitability of oppression and the primacy of dialogue in awakening critical awareness.[19] The historical desire for the elite to accumulate specific forms of knowledge, skills and abilities is interrogated and viewed as a system of 'banking'.[20] Ultimately, education is considered with caution and primarily as a political tool to sustain privilege. In other words, white privilege silently feeds power relations to sustain the power of white privilege.[21] Uncomfortable as it is, the educator is the oppressor, and the student is the oppressed. It is possible though, through embodying conscientisation, transformative education can serve as an important vehicle for political reformation within a democratic society.[22]

hooks writes, 'when I discovered the work of the Brazilian thinker Paulo Freire ... I found someone who understood that learning could be liberatory'.[23] Praxis and storytelling remains at the heart of her thinking, but juxtaposing Freire, liberatory education must be colour and difference minded.[24] hooks emphasises how every student, especially those that are silenced, feeds the dynamics of the classroom. Of all her messages, she seeks intellectual excitement by consistently feeding her students' desire to transgress from the subscribed canons of knowledge.[25]

The project facilitators

Tracy Part facilitated the project – from the Centre of Excellence of Learning and Teaching - and was taken on by Carol Hughes – Library & Digital

Technology Support Assistant - in 2020. At the time of the project, Tracy was embedded within the School of Architecture with a broad remit of building the capacity of students and staff to critically reflect on raced trajectories of engagement, progression, and achievement. A significant part of her role was to encourage learning conversations amongst her architectural colleagues to develop bespoke small-scale interventions that increase the progression and achievement rates of Global Majority students, encourage the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) outputs, and develop critical reflection of case studies for the application of Fellowship with the HEA.[26]

Carol Hughes is active in research, played a significant role in the University's successful award of the Race Equality Charter (bronze) and continues to contribute to the University Equality Collective, which reports to the Universities Office for Institutional Equity.[27] Carol describes herself as a visible Black member of staff, in a front-line role. She supports progression and achievement by creating opportunities for students to critically engage with black-centred resources, academic research, theories, and methodological material. Carol also uses this project as a case study for her application for Fellowship with the HEA.

The small-scale project

The project originated after a learning conversation between Tracy and a tutor from the School of Architecture. The visiting tutor - a senior lecturer - approached Tracy in 2019 to discuss ideas to take forward a professional fitness module she had been allocated for   teaching. In the previous year (under a different tutor), the results were below average and received poor feedback from students. This professional fitness module was described as a team-based inquiry-led module where the soft skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, emotional intelligence and resilience, are developed and assessed alongside practical skills including digital proficiency. The module is University driven and compulsory for all final year students. The students involved in the project were third-year BSc (Hons) Architecture (ARB/RIBA) students. The tutor had invited practising architects - Global Majority, white, from large companies, small companies, entrepreneurs, property developers and third sector employees - and wanted the students to be able to ask questions about who has influence/power and control during the consultation phase of designing a project. The student's assignment was a critical reflection of their participation during these discussions and to conclude with an action plan to prepare for applications for a graduate job.

The tutor expressed confidence about asking questions of influence/power and control in consultative and management processes of their profession - using questions such as 'How do client's requirements, and residents/users' experience of space impact on the design of the project?' - but had never asked students about their lived experiences of urban spaces. The brief for Tracy was to encourage the students to reflect on the raced trajectories of

who benefits, and who is disadvantaged, who is excluded and to explore the reasons why.

Tracy had previously attended a professional development day held by the University's Equality Collective, where she approached Carol for advice on activities that developed the skills to talk about race, racism and racial equality explicitly. After a decade of conversation, Carol remains deeply frustrated that she continues to hear students express that they do not see themselves represented within academic material and agreed to facilitate a three-hour critical discussion (two sessions of 90 minutes) to explore black presence within architecture. Due to the length of time between the project and this open discussion, the authors have decided to feature a short interview to critically reflect on praxis by relating the readings provided by Carol to the answers given. For ease of reading, the responses from Carol are paraphrased.

Reflections from Carol

Question 1: How did you start the critical reflection activity?

I started with my own story and encouraged the students to ask me questions to deepen their understanding of my perspectives. I answered with what I liked about my experiences living in an inner-city housing estate. We identified whose experiences of a space tend to be sought during consultation. We briefly thought about how the positionality and background of an architect can inform the consultation and design process. We then moved on to the students telling each other about where they grew up. If it was on a housing estate, or a culturally ethnic urban community, we recollected how their community had been consulted during the regeneration of their spaces. We spent time discussing why there is such a strong assumption that all urban spaces need to be improved. I spoke about the mindset of gentrifying change and hovered around the point that experts do not intend to seek opinions and learn from the residents about what works in the living space. I asked the students to think about their own experiences. Specifically, I asked them whether they thought the process of regeneration sustained a deficit assumption that the aspirations of the community – often their community - needed to be raised. I asked them to make a judgement about whether they felt that they were objectified by a deficit narrative that they needed to change to fully contribute to society.

hooks explains that narratives have

> .. a domino effect ... opening a person up to relate more closely with others and are a prime vehicle for expressing identity and encourages educators and scholars to pay regard towards the discursive practices through which subjects - the students - are constituted[28]

By storying her lived experiences, Carol is able to quickly establish connections between theory and practice and keep within the emotional context of the story. She draws attention to how her experiences are productive for deficit positioning within symbolisations of enterprising communities and/or responsible citizenry.

Question 2: How did you encourage the students to travel past their comfort zone and talk about exclusion and race?

The tutor was working with a large group of students to discuss who had power in the consultation process. The discussion was rich, but not challenging stereotypes and the different perspectives were not being collected. I moved to work with two tables that were not offering their opinion. It was not a surprise to me that both tables were Global Majority individuals with a high proportion of black female students.

We need to understand that there is no comfort zone for the students I was working with. They find themselves working within a space and they do not have a say in what they discuss. They were feeling uncomfortable because they had learned that they could not express certain perspectives. I was looking for the behavioural cues that the students could position themselves as an architect and then from this position of strength, I asked them to reflect on their own surroundings. Once the students began to narrate their ideas through the discourses of an architect, I could see the conversation begin to pop. They started to think and articulate along a professional architectural approach, but simultaneously they were able to draw from their experiences of being a dweller within these environments. They began asking questions about their future professional selves, "How would I find this out? What do they know of the people there? How would they like to be asked about change by the architects?'

We listened to each other and thought about what had changed. Why? What they missed and what they liked about the changes. We again discussed what people looked like in the consultation process. We touched on why architects felt they had to raise the aspirations of the users of housing estates. We thought about what assumptions had been made about living in urban spaces and why the focus was on improving the community. We considered what a discussion would look like if the residents were asked what they liked, why they liked it and what they wanted to keep. We considered what a consultation discussion would look like if it built on lived experiences rather than seeking change from the outside. By this stage, the students were building their own professional approaches. They were re-formatting their concept of inclusion from the perspective of being a dweller through a professional identity as an architect.

Here we can see Carol identify that the visiting tutor was pulling together the sameness within the students. By contrast, Carol encouraged reparation

work. Tembo traces through how, over the past fifty years, British schooling and wider society have normalised deficit constructions, assumptions, and perceptions of Black children, their academic abilities and behaviours.[29] Carol, by turning architecture into a cultural practice gives permission to recall memories and feelings from which to generate discussion about transformation, reinvention of space, and the purpose of public institutions, housing, and design.

Question 3: Can you tell me how you moved the students beyond storytelling, the learning outcomes of the assignment and into self-validation in a professional setting?

I asked the students about the features they did not like within the project they had been working on. I asked them to express when they had felt uncomfortable and when they had felt it was time to be silent. I encouraged them to think about if they were to start the project again, what would be the different questions they would ask?. One female student shared that she had not considered the inclusion of her background as part of her perception of how she was building her professional identity. This student is highlighting the very point we were discussing here. hooks provides a framework to reveal tensions brought about by the demand from the University to reflect as a professional. By asking lecturers to encourage students to challenge lived assumptions of the - White- status quo, hooks seeks curriculum spaces for students to transgress; to self-validate and recognise the professional value of their lived experiences.[30]

Another student explained his choice of wanting to apply for a position in a small independent practice. He surmised that a small professional environment meant architects usually worked on a single brief. This would require him to be involved in all aspects of the project from start to finish. He positioned himself as progressing quickly as opposed to working in a larger company where he would only work in one area at a time waiting as a subordinate, to move from one area to another. Another student interjected saying her choice would be to start with a larger corporate practice and to build her professional experience in stages. She preferred to work within a team where there would be more structure for her to progress. She considered that her exposure to professional risk would be lessened and imagined herself having a balanced responsibility within the team.

As these conversations developed, I witnessed change. It had been a quiet start, and the students had been hesitant to explore and push their ideas. I brought them into the discussion by challenging them to reflect on how they see themselves as architects and why. Slowly, they expanded their replies, and they opened up more with ideas and opinions. By the end of the activity, they provided each other with professionally articulated and considered responses. They reflected on the choices open to them, giving them the confidence to air their opinions. I think the shared sense of the reflection enabled them to value

their own unique positionality both within the group and in their architectural professional approach.

In a Freirean perspective, we can understand why students rarely recognise how space is organised as a political act, and why the politics of property and cultural production was not fully exploited by the visiting tutor. Carol, by rooting the student's stories in a racial memory and fleshing out the concrete acknowledgement of reality, was able to tap into what hooks refers to as 'the exercise of control over one's own space'.[31] If we also think back to Lawler, we can also see that the architectural self is not an expression of an essential individual but instead a precarious subject position where the students navigate historical interactional and contemporary subject positions.[32] We can see that Carol and the students are compelled to undergo identity work to position themselves as professional architects.

By structuring the activity through the use of storytelling, Carol demonstrates praxis. She awakens the students. Students previously silenced by group work were encouraged to articulate personalised perspectives producing a new confidence and authority to express professional opinions. By the end of the activity, these Global Majority students were drawing from lived experience, but rather than responding as a student in a lecture hall, they narrated their ideas through a professional lens. The result was that the students visibly enhanced their sense of belonging. They mobilised an inclusive dialogue as a professional, identifying a deepening awareness of the characteristics they wanted to develop and the skills they wanted to build in the professional environment of their choice.

Reflections from Tracy

As a white middle-class woman, Tracy has neither the tools nor the authority to ask students or colleagues to discuss experiences of racism. So, what is her role in confronting raced trajectories of learning and space? DiAngelo - writing as a white woman advising white people on identifying triggers and unmasking the fragility that produces defensive responses - looks to building racial stamina.[33]

Tracy understands racism as the system in which she has been socialised. Since joining the University, she has consciously undergone identity work to recognise the numerous ways in which she remains entwined within the racism that has silently yet pervasively privileged her since birth.[34] Tracy realises that she cannot process the nuances of feedback she would receive during a lecture or professional development event and agrees with DiAngelo that she needs time - and the support of colleagues - to work through how to apologise for any harm that she unwittingly perpetuates.[35] Since awakening to the depths of her white fragility, she knows she can never experience racial discomfort and remains vigilant to the threat that, at present, she inevitably colonises any exploration of black presence in a professional field.

So, what is Tracy's role?

Tracy continues to listen to the University's Black Academy network and, when invited by colleagues, attends Black Academy events. She has previously storied her encounters with structural inequality but recognises the extent of the colour blindness of her narratives. In the 1970s, having had numerous ear operations and living with epilepsy, by the age of 10, Tracy did not read, tie her shoelaces or tell the time and consequently was categorised as educationally subnormal. She was removed from mainstream education, placed under a stronger educational gaze and experienced the sudden loss of school uniform, school equipment and friends. She was only in a special school for one year, but the effects of being utterly powerless to enact change continue to have a bearing on how she negotiates her positioning today. She holds a doctorate but feels most comfortable on the margins of every academic community that she encounters.

Writing this paper, Tracy has recognised the raced trajectories - the Whiteness - of how she has been able to navigate her educational trajectory - from being under the professional and medical gaze of individuals categorised as educationally subnormal - to (not)belonging in Academia. She recognises that the identity work - the changes within her, as she uncovered intellectual curiosity - and her ongoing reparation work - as she reflects on the implications of remaining in the periphery of Academia – have primarily been open to her because she is the white academy. In responding to DiAngelo, Tracy will now ask to conduct professional development about white fragility amongst white staff only. To build racial stamina, she intends to create a reading group. She will use storytelling to open discussions. One may be why a colleague - a black academic – with a similar educational history would encounter a complex web of constraints that Tracy did not encounter. Tracy would like to discuss the implications of being white on the freedom to progress, relating the discussion to teaching, learning and assessment and the awarding gap.

In working with students, in an architectural setting, Tracy is confident she can develop critical reflection amongst students that unmasks the ways in which the design of space manifests as silencing of voice. Amongst a number of examples, she could certainly talk with authority about being excluded from professional projects due to the narrow corridors that occupy a walk-and-talk discussion. She can also story the loss of job opportunities; for example, how a spiral staircase with vivid colours caused neurological disturbances and induced vertigo ultimately led her to resign from the role.

In discussing professional cultures, Tracy could also story how colleagues respond to her learning conversations. Tracy remains personally invested in creating opportunities to learn, and her narratives tend towards those of resistance, yet colleagues often refer to her as passionate. Narratives of passion, as opposed to aggression, are too complicated to unpick in this paper, but it is by virtue of her social status and Whiteness that she

generally escapes being positioned as aggressive. Tracy will continue to invite discussions – with reference to Bourdieu's notion of social capital[36] – about how and why some individuals recognise and can more easily make use of the networks that they encounter. She will continue to story the effects of the manifestations of power.

Note of warning

Tracy, by including her own stories would dissipate the focus on race. To reveal the trajectories of structural racism that are reproduced by the academy, Tracy sees her role as to create spaces for a community of inquiry for curriculum spaces, to emerge amongst her Global Majority colleagues, who will then establish how the practice of talking about race and inequality should proceed at the University. She remains vigilant to the threat of conflating discussions of inequalities and reducing the impact of talking about race. She is passionate about the need to sustain spaces where race and racism are confronted.

Conclusion

We conclude that identity work, subject positioning, narrative construction, and reparation work are ambiguous, complex processes that require time and space for the educator (oppressor) and the student (oppressed) to engage in praxis. By educating through a liberatory lens, it is possible for education to become a vehicle for change. Through a critical awakening to the political dimensions of education, the power to question is open to all students. Power is implicitly tied through our understanding of ourselves, and our dignity and anchored through a recognition of our self-worth. Our professional identity is energised through the power of a collective. As writers, we posit that to provide spaces for transformation, we need to develop curriculum spaces that critically engage students to value their presence in academic and professional spaces, to reflect on injuries caused by lived experiences and to challenge, question and use voice to effect change.

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